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ABSTRACT

High school principals confront ethical dilemmas daily. This report describes a study that examined how MetLife/NASSP secondary principals of the year made ethical decisions conforming to three dispositions from Standard 5 of the ISLLC standards and whether they could identify processes used to reach those decisions through Rest's Four Component Model of Moral Behavior. Using a descriptive design with a mixed methodological approach of survey research and interviews of selected respondents, 63 state principals of the year were surveyed regarding selected dispositions. Quantitative results indicated that the majority of respondents made ethical decisions regarding the three dispositions tested, but analysis as to the justifications used for those decisions was inclusive. Qualitative analysis of selected respondents indicated that Rest's four components are essential justification for making ethical decisions. Four themes emerged from the qualitative study: (1) courage; (2) a philosophy of the common good; (3) gut feelings; and (4) difficulty in defining ethics. The survey instrument is appended. (Contains 54 references.) (Author)

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Running Head: AN ANALYSIS OF ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

An Analysis of Principals' Ethical Decision Making Using Rest's Four Component Model of Moral Behavior

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Abstract

High school principals confront ethical dilemmas daily. This study examined how MetLife/NASSP Secondary Principals of the Year made ethical decisions conforming to three dispositions from Standard 5 of the ISLLC Standards and if they could identify processes used to reach those decisions through Rest's Four Component Model of Moral Behavior. Using a descriptive design with a mixed methodological approach of survey research and interviews of selected respondents, State Principals of the Year (N=64) were surveyed regarding selected dispositions. Quantitative results indicated that the majority of respondents made ethical decisions regarding the three dispositions tested but analysis as to the justifications used for those decisions was inconclusive. Qualitative analysis of selected respondents indicated that Rest's four components are essential justifications for making ethical decisions. Four themes emerged from the qualitative study: courage, a philosophy of the common good, gut feelings, and difficulty in defining ethics.

An Analysis of Principals' Ethical Decision Making Using Rest's Four Component Model of Moral Behavior

Societies function effectively when the moral system that governs conflicts, imbalances, personal interests, mutual benefits, and ethical principles is operating well (Rest, 1986). Jurgen Habermas, a contemporary philosopher, postulates that human beings normally function competently until there is a breakdown of society and the moral bearings are lost. The resulting conflicts within the moral framework cause people to fumble for guidance regarding what actions to take in conflicted ethical situations (Scott, 1998).

When *A Nation At Risk* (1983) was published, our society lost its moral bearings regarding the nation's educational system. Schools have felt that loss. Beset with problems of violence, declining societal values (Bly, 1996), and societal demands for reform and accountability (Carpenter, 2000), teachers and administrators are abandoning the profession, disheartened by a lack of public respect, fractious children, and low financial reward for their services. Despite numerous reform efforts, societal dissatisfaction remains.

Fueled by the inequities of wealth, power, and status in the culture, the sibling society (Bly, 1996), and the information revolution (Rogerson & Bynum, 1995), this dissatisfaction will not be resolved unless we address the moral issues inherent within the struggle. A review of the past twenty years since *Risk* by the Koret Task force (2003) contends that we've had so little improvement in schools because *Risk* failed to confront essential issues of power and control. Milton Goldberg, (2003), former director of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, contends that *Risk* addressed this moral dimension. The final piece of effective school reform, he said, is morals and character.

Throughout the history of educational administration, leadership has reflected

American cultural, social, and political values. Prior to 1900, school leadership was value laden. As the 20th century rolled forward, however, the emphasis began to shift. School administrators became businesspersons in the early 1900s, politicians in the 1940s, and objective, rational leaders who embraced concepts of science and data-driven decision making in the 1960s (Beck & Murphy, 1994, 1997). Currently, school administrators are in the midst of another shift. Once again, educational leaders are expected to meet changing cultural values and reflect what is desirous in an administrator. This time, because the inequities in the culture involve moral issues and the familiar moral system is not functioning well with those inequities, an age-old concept has been revived: ethical decision making.

Schools are institutions of moral learning as well as academic learning. Because the experience of school is common to all Americans, preconceptions, both positive and negative, exist within the culture. Starratt (1995) points out, however, that something more powerful happens to children in school: "Individuals learn in schools to be a somebody or a nobody. They learn to be a nobody by experiencing ridicule, humiliation, and most of all, indifference" (pp. 23-24). This drama unfolds in every school building, every day, through the interactions, observations, and decisions that each child makes, and the stakes are high. The cumulative effect literally shapes a lifetime.

Rolston (1999) adds another provocative incentive for such ethical consideration:

> More than any people before as a result of our technological prowess through science and industry, we humans today have the capacity to do good and evil, to make war or to feed others, to act in justice and in love. Nor is it only the human fate that lies in our hands. We are altering the natural history of the planet, threatening alike the future of life, the fauna and the flora, and human life. With such increasing knowledge and power comes increasing duty. Science demands conscience. Philosophers must join with scientists, theologians, political scientists, literary analysts, and others, to evaluate the origins and principles of ethics. (p. 213)

Philosophical arguments as to the purpose of schooling and the assertion that principals make ethical decisions daily have imbued scientific reasoning with a conscience. The myth of value-free leadership (Rolston, 1999) is breaking down. The school leader is pivotal to guiding schools through the process of change while maintaining values that are necessary for cultural stability and purpose.

Skills in moral reasoning are desirable when confronted with ethical dilemmas (Greenfield, 1993), because the choice often is not between a right and a wrong but between two competing right answers. Moreover, the proper course of action is often not clear in the face of conflicting and competing moral values, and reassurance as to what is right is frequently withheld. Such ethical decisions take time and reflection, two commodities that school principals normally do not have.

Beck (1996) captures the need for such research on ethical decision making succinctly: "At least four characteristics of our professional lives compel us to take seriously the challenges at hand, to enter into thoughtful and sustained conversations about the values we hold and to construct appropriate ways to honor those values" (pp. 8-9). Those four characteristics are:

1) The situations that challenge our moral reasoning are complex.
2) The stakes are high in situations that challenge our moral reasoning. (And, there are no easy answers in high stakes, ethical dilemmas.)
3) The impact of our moral decisions and actions is enormous.
4) Institutions that traditionally guided our moral reasoning are crumbling. (pp. 9-11)

But how does moral leadership come to be? We know that power and control issues stem from individual and collective moral stances. Yet, very little research has been done in educational administration to better understand how school administrators make ethical decisions within the school context. This study attempts to discover more about that process.

Leadership Ethics and Relevant Literature

Ethics, morality, and values are the bedrock from which leadership derives strength, purpose, and focus. Hodgkinson (1991) notes, "The leader is the one who can best perceive and best resolve value conflicts. If there are no value conflicts then there is no need for leadership" (p. 11). However, capturing the complexity of ethical leadership in schools is difficult because of its continuing refinement through societal needs both for reform and for stability. In addition, leadership and ethics are nebulous concepts.

Two schools of thought exist regarding ethics (Beck & Murphy, 1997). One is that certain principles exist, "rules, ideas, and ideals that transcend individual preferences and can guide objective decision making" (p. 11). Ethical codes are example of such principles. The other school of thought asserts that the "ethical individual will have a certain value-based orientation or perspective that will shape her or his understanding" (p. 40) That is, an individual's history, interactions with communities, individuals, and one's own thought processes and experiences shape one's value system and thus one's moral decisions.

The concept of ethics takes center stage in the thoughts of philosophers such as Kant, Aristotle, and Hume (Beauchamp, 1982) and psychologists such as Kohlberg and Rest (Frost, Michael, & Guarino, 1997). Although evidence that ethics might be genetic is sparse in the literature, Lapsley (1992) discusses age-old wisdom, Rolston (1999) universals, and Jackall (1988) emotional aridity when ethical behavior is denied. Their thoughts hint of an underlying yearning for an ethical component of human nature. With the exception of empathy, the literature does not support such an idea (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). Such ethical discussion invites what L. W. Beck (1970) calls the "intellectual venture" of philosophy, " . . .if it attempts to modify

human beings at all, it does so by trying to modify ways of thinking about moral questions rather than by trying to tell what the right answers to the questions are" (p. 44).

Despite the above mental gymnastics of philosophy, statements of ethics are common to school organizations. The American Association of School Administrators' Statements of ethics has been adopted by six other school administrator organizations. Ethics is deemed of sufficient importance to stand alone as the fifth of six Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards: "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner" (ISLLC, 1996). Included under this standard are the following eight dispositions:

> The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to:
> 1. the ideal of the common good
> 2. the principles in the Bill of Rights
> 3. the right of every student to a free, quality education
> 4. bringing ethical principles to the decision-making process
> 5. subordinating one's own interest to the good of the school community
> 6. accepting the consequences for upholding one's principles and actions
> 7. using the influence of one's office constructively and productively in the services of all students and their families
> 8. development of a caring community. (ISLLC, 1996, p. 20)

A professional code of ethics, however, does not ensure that administrators will consistently make ethical choices (Dexheimer, 1970; Fenstermaker, 1994). Moreover, a close perusal of the above dispositions reveals conflicting philosophies. Administrators who are philosophically aware understand that the ideal of the common good is in conflict with individual rights. Five of the above ISLLC dispositions speak to the character of an administrator, his/her virtue, which challenges the utilitarian viewpoint of rights and the ideal of the common good. Furthermore, these virtue dispositions appeal to a common community convention of character that often is localized. For example, in a pluralistic society, integrity as defined by one community may be viewed as stubbornness within a neighboring community. Keen intellects

have provided moral imperatives for moral action within the complexity of human endeavors. Perhaps ethical codes are not intended for practice but were developed as a standard for public and personal reassurance. Yet, school administrators have power and influence over others. They are in the "business of creating persons" (Strike et al., 1988, p. 84), and such responsibility implies a duty to be proficient in ethical reasoning and to adhere to ethical codes.

A recurring theme throughout the literature is the assertion that ethical leaders should know themselves and have "a willingness to understand the values of others as emanating from their stories and experiences" (Beck & Murphy, 1997, p. 192). Recognition is growing that the cultivation of ethical leadership requires more than just academic discussions. Ethical decision-making is situated in personal and professional values, beliefs, and experiences and the ability to think and morally reason through those ethical dilemmas where a right answer may not exist. Adding to the confusion is the lack of a consistent definition for four important terms: ethics, values, virtue, and morals. A relationship exists "between the importance of a social issue and confusion in public discourse about that issue. And unfortunately, it's a direct relationship: the more important the issue, the more confusion in how people talk to each other about it" (Boyd, 1992, p. 141).

School administrators are burdened with a "contradictory mission: to preserve tradition and to be agents of change" (Foster, 1988, p. 68). The job is not easy and tolerance for moral ambiguity must be high. Reflection on Habermasian thought that humans do not think about ethics until there is a social breakdown adds another dimension (Scott, 1998).

Background

Almost 40 years ago, Lawrence Kohlberg turned the then current "socialization view upside down. Instead of starting with the assumption that *society* determines what is morally

right and wrong, Kohlberg said it is the *individual* who determines right and wrong" (Rest, 1994, p. 2). Yet he didn't entirely turn from societal influence. Kohlberg also believed that individuals make choices and ethical decisions in a community setting (Starratt, 1991).

His stage theory states that as humans mature, they move sequentially through six stages of moral reasoning. From Stage 1, punishment and obedience, Kohlberg maintained that humans move through four succeeding levels and ultimately are capable of reaching Stage 6, universal ethical principal orientation (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983). The debate regarding moral behavior moved to gender when Gilligan (1982) challenged the Kohlbergian view that the person of highest moral development looks to universal ethical principles that are justice oriented in nature. Such an orientation is the way males develop, she theorized, not females, and Kohlberg's measures shortchanged women because women were assessed through a justice framework rather than an ethic of care. She developed her own stage theory specific to women. Other female ethicists such as Noddings (1992) and Beck (1992) built upon Gilligan's work. They promote the ethic of care as a perspective from which schools can achieve change.

James Rest, a student of Kohlberg's, also saw the individual, not society, as determining right from wrong. He developed the Defining Issues Test to quantitatively test Kohlberg's work. Thoma (1986) found that women score consistently higher on the DIT than do men. However, Rest (1986) found that age/education is over 250 times more powerful than gender in accounting for DIT score variance.

Four Component Model of Moral Behavior

As Rest embarked upon a major literature review, he began to understand that "moral judgment is not the only process in the psychology of morality" (p. 20) nor does a moral judgment level predict moral behavior. Rest's research (1986) revealed four common themes,

and he conceptualized a theory around these components. His development of the Four Component Model of Moral Behavior had one ultimate goal: "to understand and predict actual moral behavior and decision making" (Rest, 1986, p. 21). He formulated his theory to answer this question: Why do good people sometimes make bad decisions?

Rest's Four Component Model of Moral Behavior suggests that in the decision-making process, justifications for a decision involving an ethical dilemma are processed through four components: sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and courage. Moral failing could result from deficiencies in any one of the components. Elements of Rest's model are as follows:

> Component 1: The person must have been able to make some sort of interpretation to the particular situation in terms of what actions were possible, who (including oneself) would be affected by each course of action, and how the interested parties would regard such effect on their welfare.
> Component 2: The person must have been able to make a judgment about which course of action was morally right (or fair or just or morally good), thus labeling one possible line of action as what a person ought (morally ought) to do in that situation.
> Component 3: The person must give priority to moral values above other personal values such that a decision is made to intend to do what is morally right.
> Component 4: The person must have sufficient perseverance, ego strength, and implementation skills to be able to follow through on his/her intention to behave morally, to withstand fatigue and flagging will, to overcome obstacles. (Rest, 1986, pp. 3-4)

Component 1 is referred to as moral sensitivity, component 2 as moral judgment, component 3 as moral motivation, and component 4 as moral courage. It is important to note that these components are processes and not general traits of people. Nor is this theory a stage theory such as Kohlberg's or Gilligan's. Rest visualized component relationships to one another as both independent and dependent. Neither are they particularly linear as to sequence: "The four processes are present in a logical sequence, as an analytical framework for depicting what must go on for moral behavior to occur" (Rest, 1986, p. 5). Such a sequence is only a convenience for print purposes and does not represent how the model functions. Thoma (1994) suggests that the theory serves now to focus research into two different directions: assessment of the components

and their contribution to moral reasoning and identification of the internal workings of each component. Each component is, therefore, at one and the same time a process.

Evidence exists that moral sensitivity can be reliably assessed (Hunter, 1997) and can be enhanced through instruction (Bebeau, 1994). Moral motivation, on the other hand, appears to be tied to self-concepts such as a professional identity "that includes the moral elements that distinguish a profession from an occupation or trade" (Bebeau, 1994, p. 133). Confusion regarding conception of professional identity and numerous models of professionalism guiding a professional's ethical decisions indicates a discrepancy between intent and outcome. Specific instruction in role concept is needed, for "acquisition of a clear sense of professional dignity cannot be left to the 'hidden curriculum'" (p. 135). Bebeau supports Rest's contention that moral failings can result from deficiencies in any one of the components.

This article describes a study of ethical decision-making practices by secondary school administrators. Two questions dominated the study. Do administrators make ethical decisions in accordance to an ethical standard? What justifications do the respondents use for making ethical decisions? The quantitative portion addressed both questions. The qualitative investigated that zone of actual decision making nested between Rest's theory and ISLLC Standard 5 dispositions.

Methods

A mixed methodological approach was utilized for this study, and the information collected included both quantitative and qualitative data. Through survey research methods, principals read three different ethical narratives, assessed and selected action choices, and then selected justifications for those action choices. The qualitative portion, telephone interviews with selected respondents, served to elaborate upon the results of the quantitative instrument and to

further test if the components of Rest's Four Component Model of Moral Behavior were present in the decision-making process.

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of the 104 secondary school administrators who had received the 1998 and 1999 State Principal of the Year awards, which are jointly sponsored by MetLife and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). Individuals who receive this award are identified as exemplary leaders and are selected through a structured process within each state. Included in the selection criteria is the ability to resolve complex problems and to resolve short-term issues while balancing them against long-term objectives (NASSP, n.d.). These Principals of the Year have been identified by their colleagues as extraordinary leaders who are committed to their staff and students (NASSP, n.d.). Consequently, they arguably are experienced in solving and resolving problems, and they should be more proficient in conceptualizing and verbalizing their ethical behaviors than a more representative sampling of secondary principals. The response rate was 61%, with 63 of the 104 administrators agreeing to participate in this study. Of those respondents, eight were middle level administrators and 55 were secondary administrators. Forty-eight were male and 15 were female.

Data were collected on four demographic variables. Due to Gilligan's examination of Kohlberg's work, gender was an obvious choice. Building enrollment, a second demographic variable, looked to provide evidence, if any, as to differences in decision making between urban and rural respondents. Years of experience and ethical training are two positive indicators of ethical decision making and were thus logical choices for this study of ethical decision making.

Instrumentation

Of the eight dispositions noted within Standard 5 of the ISLLC Standards, only three dispositions were tested due to space and time constraints, and those three dispositions from ISLLC Standard 5 are:

> Narrative 1: "The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to the ideal of the common good."
> Narrative 2: "The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to accepting the consequences for upholding one's principles and actions."
> Narrative 3: "The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to subordinating one's own interest to the good of the school community."

The ideal of the common good represents an ethical principle while the other two dispositions represent virtue ethics, thus giving representation to the two different ways of thinking about ethics mentioned earlier. Because the narratives had to provoke interest, common themes to the job of a high school principal could be constructed easily around these dispositions.

These ISLLC dispositions are vague in that no specifics or examples are provided as to the nuances of each; therefore, some working definitions were used. These definitions were obtained through the literature review, in consultation with educational administration professors during the process of revisions, from the researchers' experiences within school settings, and through structured course experiences. The operationalized definitions are:

1. The disposition that the "administrator believes in, values and is committed to the ideal of the common good" meant that all involved would benefit from the decision made. If possible the solution would be a win-win situation.
2. The disposition that the "administrator believes in, values and is committed to accepting the consequences of upholding one's principles and actions" meant the administrator should adhere to his/her principles and actions even at personal cost if he/she believes those actions to be good for the student or district.

3. The disposition that the "administrator believes in, values, and is committed to subordinating one's own interest to the good of the school community" meant that decisions made by the administrator should be for the benefit of the school community and not for the benefit or convenience of the administrator.

The survey instrument consisted of three narratives, each keyed to a specific disposition under Standard 5 of the ISLLC Standards. The narratives reflected common scenarios encountered by secondary and middle level principals, including student discipline for Narrative 1, a controversial coaching recommendation for Narrative 2, and a teaching evaluation for Narrative 3, which reflects an established cultural role for administrators. Following the narratives were action choices, only one of which was in alignment with the ISLLC disposition tested. Respondents revealed their own dispositions through their action choices.

Four educational administration professors assisted in editing the narratives and offered suggestions for clarity. These professors were formerly building-level administrators, and each was knowledgeable regarding the ISLLC standards, readings in the educational administration literature regarding ethical practices, and Rest's four-component model. The revised ethical narratives were edited for brevity and clarity, yet provided the necessary contextual information needed to make a decision without leading the respondent to a specific decision. As a final step, these narratives were field-tested with practicing secondary principals. One narrative, action choices, and justifications from the survey instrument is shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

While recognizing that a variety of actions could be taken to resolve each scenario, the researchers adopted a forced-choice format for the survey. Under each narrative, respondents were asked to choose an action choice from four viable decision choices. All four represented choices that could be made by a practicing principal, Only one response was morally appropriate, as aligned with the ISLLC disposition being tested. The panel of educational administration professors was consulted, both in the construction of the four responses and in identifying and validating the most appropriate response for each scenario.

Respondents were then asked to identify justifications for their decision. The eight justifications following the action choices represented the four components/processes of Rest's (1986) theory: moral awareness, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral courage. Because of space and time constraints, the survey also had a forced-choice, forced-response format for the justifications. Justifications were constructed in a format consistent with the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1986) and with justifications used in Bebeau's (1994) case studies.

After extensive deliberation regarding how to measure courage as a reasoning process that contributed to decision making, it was determined that courage cannot be measured. To resolve that problem, the justifications written to address that component simply switched valence, and the justifications addressing sensitivity and motivation also switched valence. The justifications representing judgment did not. These justifications are limited in number and are constructs that if time and space permitted could be enhanced and enlarged upon to reflect more accurately the four components of Rest's theory.

Respondents rated each justification as to its importance in their decision-making process regarding the action choice. Because the justifications were intended to represent the processes in Rest's model, consistency warranted that the justifications reflect only narrative content change

and not changes in reasoning. Unlike the action choice, the most appropriate justification was not identified; rather the degree of importance was measured. If the morally appropriate action choice was selected, justifications 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 ideally should have great importance to that decision and justifications 1, 6, and 8 should have no importance. A limitation of the study was that there was no way of knowing how each respondent construed the eight justifications for the action choices based on information in the ethical narratives, but the assumption was that the similarity of the justifications in each narrative provided consistent, meaningful responses. The qualitative portion of the study further illuminated the processes each respondent engaged in when making an ethical decision.

Because a quantitative study of this nature had not been previously conducted, a qualitative component was added to gain additional information as to internal processes. Using the same telephone script with each respondent that was independent of the justifications allowed for pattern identification while controlling for individual preferences. Exploration of the justifications on the survey would have substantiated Rest's components through pre-determination, thus the open-ended questions were constructed to allow for a dialogue about ethical decision making and that process.

Ten respondents all selected the most appropriate action choices, but five of the interviewees (four men and one woman) had a high number of correct justifications. The other five (four men and one woman) had a low number of correct justifications. So that reliability was assured, interviewees were simply informed that the purpose of the telephone interview was to further explore processes principals use in ethical decision making.

Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the demographic characteristics. The respondent group was 76.2% male and 23.8% female. The majority, 93.6%, had over 11 years of administrative experience. Only one respondent had 1-5 years of experience, three had 6-10 years, 17 had 11-15 years, 16 had 16-20 years, while 12 had more than 25 years of experience. Two respondents did not indicate years of experience information. Of the 61 respondents supplying information about ethics training, 62.3% did not complete an ethics course or exploration of ethics within their administrative preparation program.

Enrollment size of the respondents' buildings was classified into three categories: small, enrollments from 1-900 students; medium, enrollments from 901-1300, and large, enrollments from 1301-2900. Of the 59 respondents who completed this portion of the instrument, 18 (30.5%) fell into the small building enrollment category, 22 (37.3%) fell into the medium building enrollment category, and 19 (32.2%) fell into the large building enrollment category.

Chi-Square Tests

Most appropriate action choice. Narrative 1 described a student discipline scenario and depicted the disposition of the common good. Of the respondents (N = 63), 41 or 65.1% selected the most appropriate action choice, which involving suspending the student and consulting the superintendent regarding the possibility of alternative schooling. For Narrative 2, which centered on accepting consequences of a controversial employment recommendation, 46 respondents (73.0%) selected the most appropriate action choice, "recommend the coach for rehire." Narrative 3 involved a teaching evaluation, and 59 (93.7%) selected the most appropriate action choice, which depicted subordinating one's own interest. This choice involved initiating professional growth planning to assist the teacher in improving his classroom management.

Gender. No statistically significant differences were found regarding gender for any of the three narratives (Narrative 1, $p = .165$: Narrative 2, $p = .975$, and Narrative 3, $p = .954$).

Years of experience. Respondents with more years of experience selected more correct action choices than did respondents with less experience. Statistical significance was found ($p<.001$) in Narrative 3 between years of experience and action choices.

Ethics training. No significant differences were found regarding ethics training. For Narratives 1, 2, and 3 respectively, tests results were $p = .547$, $p = .687$, and $p = .288$.

Building enrollment. No significant differences were found for building enrollment differences. Results of chi-square testing for Narratives 1, 2, and 3 were as follows: $p = .703$, $p = .090$, and $p = .415$.

Logistic Regression Analysis

To determine if the selection of justifications was useful in predicting the action choices, logistic regression was conducted for each narrative regarding the action choice and justification rating selection. Expectations were that there would be an association and that if the correct action choice was selected, the reasoning processes would support that decision. Conversely, if an incorrect action choice were selected, the reasoning processes would support that decision. No statistical differences were found in selection of action choices based on justifications (Narrative 1, $p = .171$; Narrative 2, $p = .216$, and Narrative 3, $p = .921$).

One-Way ANOVA

No statistical significance was found regarding the dependent variable, correct justifications, in regard to independent variables of gender, years of experience, ethics training, or building enrollment. Combining all components, respondents selected zero to six correct justifications for Narrative 1, zero to eight correct justifications for Narrative 2, and within

Narrative 3, respondents selected two to seven correct justifications. Additionally, the mean responses of men and women for Narrative 3 were higher (mean = 4.68) than those mean responses for Narratives 1 and 2 (mean = 1.89, mean = 2.73).

Qualitative Analysis

Selected respondents, five with a high number of correct justifications and five with a low number of correct justifications, were interviewed by telephone. Each interview followed a semi-structured interview format, and for analysis each conversation was taped. The tapes were transcribed, and a written record prepared using a word processing program.

Each transcript was reviewed several times in an effort to identify common themes. Rest's components were highlighted with different colors. Anecdotes that illustrated several of these components, and key words that were common to a majority of interviewees also were highlighted. Differences in syntax, word choice, and overall content were noted among each respondent's answers and among the two groups of respondents.

Descriptively, this study indicated that there was some awareness of the four components in ethical decision making in the selection of correct justifications. The qualitative data revealed a stronger link to Rest's components. Consider the following response from a principal:

> A parent really and truly wants, demands something, and you know for the sake of the district, it is not the right decision. It would be much easier to say to the parent, "Yes, I am going to capitulate to you. Yeah, that's the way I am going to go." But sometimes, you have to say "No!" One, it is not right for your child, and no it is not right for the district, and take a real hard stand. Not to be mean, but you know it is the right thing to do for the child and for the district. Sometimes, if you just say, "Oh my god, if I had just said, Yeah. Fine. Do it." And let the kid suffer but "oh well it is the parent's decision." But you know in your heart, that is the wrong way to go.

Within this capsulation of his ethical reasoning processes, the respondent evidenced all four components of Rest's theory. Awareness of the parent's demands, of the child's suffering if those demands were met, and of the consequences of his decision indicate moral sensitivity.

Interwoven within that moral sensitivity was a standard of moral judgment regarding "the right thing to do for the child and the district." Competing motivations, helping/not helping the child or the district, enduring/sidestepping the parent's outrage and backlash of that outrage, or giving in/not giving in to the parents' demands vied for importance. Choosing the moral action outweighed appeasing the parent, but awareness of the emotional price and weariness of having to pay that price can be heard in the exclamation, "Oh my god." The courage to continue, to uphold the judgment, to not wilt under the pressure was illustrated in the vacillation of thought and word choice. "Capitulation" versus "real hard stand" indicated a weighing of options and a consideration of consequences from the two extremes. Demonstrating that courage again and again with different faces and difference situations adds another dimension. This respondent considered all the angles, filtered each through Rest's psychological processes, and made the moral decision. If he had been weak in any one component or combination of components, he would have failed, at least by his standards, to do the right thing.

Four themes, courage, the common good, gut feelings, and difficulty defining ethics, emerged in this study as well as a small difference in judgment levels. In addition, each principal affirmed his/her hope and belief that their ethical reputation had a significant role in their selection for the State Principal of the Year award.

Courage. The respondents spoke of courage not in the heroic measure of crisis response (although that is part of the job) but rather in the sense of the internal fortitude necessary to consistently believe in the value of human growth and to make decisions regarding that belief. Rest and Narvaez (1994) define moral courage in terms of what it is not: not wilting under pressure, not easily distracted or discouraged, and not being a wimp or weak-willed.

Without hesitation, all respondents unequivocally answered 'yes" when asked if it took courage to do their job. Usually the response was followed with a laugh of surprise at the admission, but the examples they provided amply demonstrated the need for that attribute:

> I think, frequently, a high school principal has to stand up to parents who are being irrational.
>
> Almost every decision you make has a negative impact on somebody.
>
> You are faced with so many decisions, constant decision making. Without a morality base for that, you could make some very adverse decisions.

The common good. The ideal of the common good pertains to certain general conditions that are equally beneficial for everyone (Beauchamp, 1982). Alternative schooling instead of expulsion is an example of the common good in that our social systems and institutions work in a manner that benefits all. Expulsion of the troublemaker, on the other hand, is a utilitarian concept, the greatest good for the greatest number. The literature reflects this ongoing philosophical shift with an emerging moral stance that all students are educable and that the stakes are high (Beck, 1996; Starratt, 1995).

Upon first glance, these principals gave examples of what seemed to be a utilitarian concept: the greatest good for the greatest number with little regard for how those results are achieved (Taylor, 1989). The termination of a 26-year veteran who was four years away from retirement was not good for the teacher nor was it an easy decision. The principal explained what prompted him to act: "I could not sacrifice four more years of kids for this guy's retirement." But the common good motivated them to help those who were sacrificed for the greatest good. Each of the principals spoke of trying to help, counsel, support, and work with individuals to improve performance before dismissal or in the case of students, expulsion. Still others sought to help after dismissal by providing contacts for jobs, assistance with references, or in the case of

students, alternative schools. Others spoke of bending the rules, although they did not do it often As one principal explained,

> I had a kid expelled for fighting one time. I really . . .I did not think that we would expel him. And this kid was set to graduate. All he needed was English, so I worked it out with the English teacher to give him homebound instruction, and we gave him his diploma. He didn't get to walk or anything, but the superintendent and the school board did not know that I did that. That kid got his diploma. **He was a good kid,** and I really had a hard time dealing with that. The fairness of it. Wasn't equitable.

Gut feelings. Respondents stressed decision making through investigation, being aware and sensitive to other's needs, listening for different perspectives, and examining all angles. This scientific observation and inquiry into fact-finding assured rationality, yet paradoxically, each relied on a gut feeling to affirm that rational decision making as the right decision. When queried as to that process, most responded in a similar fashion, with the exception of one person: "It's a gut feeling. An emotion. I can't explain it."

The exception was the principal who scored highest on the number of correct justifications for all narrative choices. He did not measure a single decision as right or wrong, but rather used time as the judge as to the rightness or wrongs of a series of decisions. He lived with uncertainty for the moment but direction and purpose for the future.

Difficulty defining ethics. Respondents were more comfortable acting upon their ethical beliefs than trying to define them. All struggled for an answer that would encapsulate their belief system.

Difference between groups. A subtle difference emerged between the interviewed principals with a high number of justifications and those with a low number of justifications. The difference resided in judgment levels, specifically a concern with a universal orientation versus concern with individuals. Both are commendable and indicate high levels of emotional maturity, decisions based on a "universal principal of justice, on the reciprocity and equality of human

rights, and on respect for the dignity of humans as individual persons" (Thomas, 1996, p. 465) operate from a higher level of moral judgment than those that are concerned with the individual.

Discussion

A finding of this study was that the majority of respondents selected the ethical action choice in all three narratives, 65.1%, 73%, and 93.7%. That is good news, since ethical decision making is a quality component of exemplary leadership in today's schools. But a high percentage of these principals failed to identify the most appropriate responses to these scenarios. Over 1/3 of the State Principals of the Year identified incorrect choices for the first narrative while 1/4 selected an incorrect response for the second narrative. Moreover, they were uncertain as to the processes used to make those decisions. Only in the discussion generated through the qualitative portion of the study could elements of Rest's theory be determined.

The quantitative data suggests that reflection upon a clear societal value coupled with job experience led to a better understanding of the internal processes used to come to that decision. Statistical significance was found for years of experiences and action choices in Narrative 3 and the mean for justifications was 4.68 an indication that respondents were more certain of the processes they used when making this decision. While all the narratives deal with incidents common to secondary principals, only narrative 3, a virtue ethic, clearly mirrors an established cultural value that has withstood the test of time: the role of the leader equals supervision of employees.

Student discipline, explored in Narrative 1, is also common to the job description for principals, but the disposition tested is an ethic of principle. For student discipline issues, principals typically rely on policy, a utilitarian concept, whereas the disposition tested reflected

the common good. Indeed, 1/3 of these respondents followed policy and acted to suspend and expel. As Habermas suggests, a shift in cultural values causes confusion and people are uncertain as to the right course of action. Principals ride these rocky waves of shifting values every day, but they can flounder on the embedded rocks of old cultural values that have not yet eroded, especially if they cannot relate the processes used to make such decisions. As Greenfield (1993) noted, skills in moral reasoning are desirable when confronted with such competing moral values especially when cultural reassurance as to what is right is withheld or in the midst of change.

Narrative 2 results further illustrate the confusion when cultural cues are ambiguous. Although 73% of the respondents selected the best ethical choice in Narrative 2, accepting the consequences for upholding one's principles and actions, a fourth did not. As Beck (1996) notes, the situations that challenge our moral reasoning are complex. Accepting consequences can be a euphemism for failure, a concept that is in the midst of redefinition in our society. Failure as a stepping-stone to success is an emerging concept that has not been readily accepted by our culture or our schools (Maxwell, 2000). Furthermore, newspaper headlines define ethics as a negative, a misconduct (Piper et al., 1993). To be a leader in an environment that does not tolerate failure and yet be held accountable for and accepting of consequences in upholding principles and actions within a society that defines such behavior as a misconduct is confusing. The mean for justifications was 2.73, again an indication that respondents, whether they chose the ethical choice or not, were not as certain regarding their skills in moral reasoning processes as they were in Narrative 3.

From the qualitative study, four themes emerged: courage, the common good, gut feelings, and a difficulty defining ethics. The emotional turmoil associated with ethical decision making exacts a toll. All ten respondents agreed that it takes courage to be a principal and that

they were motivated to act for the common good whenever possible. But these decisions are not easy to make, they said, and they remembered them, long after the situation was resolved. To a one, these ten respondents indicated that they knew that they had made the right decision because their gut told them so. Getting to how those gut feelings come to be was difficult for them, as difficult as defining ethics. As one said, "It's an emotion. I can't explain it."

This difficulty in defining ethics was surprising. These articulate personable people could not define the very thing they considered vital to their reputations, career, and selection for State Principal of the Year. This finding substantiates Boyd's (1992) claim that there's a direct relationship between the importance of the issue and more confusion in how people talk to each other about it.

The difficulty in the language confusion is further illustrated by the phrase, "what's right for kids," and variations of it that permeated the interviews. No one, however, defined the term "right." This statement "do what's right" was always made with conviction, a sense of purpose, and with the tacit understanding that everyone would know what "right" meant. Interestingly, what was right at one stage of a career was not right in another stage. As one principal said, "My philosophy has changed over the years. I am now opposed to expulsion unless it is for weapons."

Rest's theory does not address this language confusion, gut feelings or intuition. However, one of the four components is ethical sensitivity, an awareness of other's perspectives, different possible actions, and how one's actions affect other people (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). The contribution of all the senses heightens awareness, which in turn contributes to intuition. If intuition can be defined in part as ethical sensitivity, then Rest's component does contribute to gut feelings. Perhaps that is why human beings function well until there is a breakdown of society and the moral bearings are lost (Foster, 1984). When cultural values are changing or have

not yet emerged and society is immersed in the melee of confusion, people cannot intuitively identify cultural values that are the mirror by which they gauge doing what is right.

Ethics is central to our culture. The repeated phrase "do what's right for kids" and the positive response it evoked illustrates that. Such ethical bedrock provides a sense of security and solidity in an ever-changing world. However, that bedrock must be reflective of the culture it supports. Ethics then becomes, at one and the same time, a checklist for moral behavior and a means through which change becomes a norm in the culture.

Implications

Rest formulated his theory to answer a question: Why do good people make bad decisions? This study suggests that a clear cultural value coupled with job experience promotes certainty and a better understanding of how one's decisions are made. Changing values within society, however, lead to uncertainty as to the right course of action. The responses to Narrative 1 captured such uncertainty and are a snapshot of an educational value in the midst of change. Moreover, the internal processes used to make those decision are not as clear, as evidenced by the fact that respondents had difficulty defining ethics and relied on gut feelings to determine if they had made the right decision.

This finding has some obvious implications for those who train principals and superintendents for social justice. The decision-making process is at one and the same time reflective of societal values, yet intensely personal and specific to the individual. Going against a cultural value takes courage and such decision making is not made without personal cost. More than one of these respondents was certain that the job of principal had taken years off of his/her life. If aspiring principals understood that the job is fraught with ethical dilemmas that have

conflicting values, their tolerance for ambiguity tolerance might improve. If the process through which they were trained as school administrators was one of self-discovery about how they make ethical decisions as well as exploration of competing moral theories from the fields of philosophy, psychology and sociology, aspiring principals and practicing principals would have a foundation of understanding and a cultivated awareness of their own ethical decision-making processes. That would help them with the decision making process. The inclusion of trend recognition in the American culture is important to this exploration, for often such trends indicate minute shifts in values.

In light of this research, principal preparation programs should encourage the practice of self-reflection, praxis, and self-awareness of the biases and values that individuals bring to the job. Such metacognitive approaches, which are different from lecture and discussion formats, will help principals to advance their own understanding of the processes they use to resolve ethical dilemmas. In addition, critical thinking as valuation couched within an ethic of care would be of value to practicing administrators so that they might better understand moral motivations within the secondary school setting.

Cobbled together from centuries of ideas that have worked to sustain our culture, paradoxical moral philosophies permeate our culture. Grounding school practitioners in a historical background, competing moral philosophies, and the function and purpose of morals and ethics in a culture would help them better understand the culture they represent and the forces, both internal and external, that they must overcome in order to sustain or change cultural values.

Educational administration is a profession that is value-laden. Bringing awareness of virtue ethics (How do we want to live?) to the forefront of preparation programs within the

context of school reform will enhance critical awareness of the purpose of secondary schooling and preparedness of young teens for their roles as adults in our society. As Goldberg (2003) said, "Civic well-being and societal health depend on both the intellectual and moral status of our citizens. We who seek to improve education must always remember that this, in the end, is why we educate."

To maintain the status quo takes little initiative or leadership. To illustrate that concept, schools have always been places where children struggled for identities that defined them as adults. Yet in today's world, society is dissatisfied and critical of the disregard that children experience in schools. Principals are key figures in that quest for change, for they represent values while at the same time imposing them through their decision making.

The impact can be huge. More than any other profession, with the possible exception of the medical field, educational administration affects people's lives, and there is a duty to make decisions from the most ethical stance possible. To make decisions in situations where there are often no right answers or competing right answers is difficult. Blasted by demands and buffeted by competing values, the good principal can make a bad decision unless grounded in his/her own ethical filters of courage, motivation, judgment, and sensitivity. And the stakes are high. American schools are where American youth learn about morality.

Conclusion

Using Rest's Four Component Model of Moral Behavior as a theoretical foundation, this study examined ethical decision-making practices by secondary school administrators who had been honored as Principals of the Year in their respective states. When confronted with scenarios commonly faced by secondary school principals, a high percentage of these individuals selected

the most appropriate action responses. State Principals of the Year are exemplary leaders who may be more fully cognizant of ethical practices than the typical school administrator. However, up to 1/3 of these individuals selected inappropriate actions for two of these three narratives. This study points to the need for administrators to be more fully aware of their values, beliefs, and ethical practices as they engage in the decision-making process, especially since this study showed that they rely on gut feelings to determine whether or not a decision was right.

Complex issues, such as ethics, are sustained within social, emotional, and psychological contexts, to name just a few of the factors that influence ethical decision making. Understanding that complexity can be helpful to beginning administrators and better prepare them for the job. As Beck and Murphy (1997) note:

> Leaders live and work in environments of uncertainty where problems require choices between competing goods (or competing bads), where persons legitimately hold different perspectives and call for different courses of action, and where one is frequently unsure, even after taking action, that she or he did the right thing. (p. 193)

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Figure 1

Figure 1
Instrument narrative, action choices and justifications

Narrative 1: Principal Gray glanced up from the report. Jace Halliday, unrepentant, with an IQ of 130, a talent for playing the piano, and a penchant for trouble, stared back. The bruise under his eye was read and raw, as were the swollen knuckles of his right hand. Asking for Jace's account of the recent fight with another student, Principal Gray listened, expecting no contradictions with the teacher's report. There were none. Jace had been provoked, he swung first, the other boy swung back, and Jace put him down with one more punch. And yes, he was aware that this was his fifth fight this year and that the consequences would be severe, but Principal Gray had to understand. This time, it was not his fault. Principal Gray noted that the teacher's report substantiated that there were extenuating circumstances.

Principal Gray is certain that if Jace, a regular education student, is suspended for ten days and recommended for expulsion as the handbook dictates, that he will not return to school. In addition, the musical performance scheduled for two days from now will be substantially impacted as Jace has a key role. Plus, Principal Gray knows that if Jace is suspended and recommended for expulsion, Mrs. Halliday will once again insist that Jace be considered for a 504 plan. Tests do not indicate any such disability, yet she is certain that her son has a disability that substantially impacts his ability to learn. Further complicating the decision is Principal Gray's knowledge that the board of education is seriously considering implementing a zero tolerance policy against fighting.

Principal Gray thought about the ambiguities and considered several alternatives. Check the box that corresponds to your view about each of the possible action choices. Rate each of them using the following scale.	Highly Questionable	Questionable	Defensible	Highly Defensible
A. Suspend and initiate an expulsion hearing	☐	☐	☐	☐
B. Suspend and consult with the superintendent regarding the possibility of alternative schooling.	☐	☐	☐	☐
C. Suspend but allow Jace to participate in the musical.	☐	☐	☐	☐
D. Implement a 504 plan immediately	☐	☐	☐	☐

If you were Principal Gray, which action would you take? ☐A ☐B ☐C ☐D

Now please consider the reasons that best justify your action choice. Rate the Importance of each justification in determining your decision using the following scale.	1) No importance 2) Little Importance 3) Some Importance 4) Great Importance
1. You know your colleagues will not support this decision	1) ☐ 2) ☐ 3) ☐ 4) ☐
2. Expelling a student can be justified with a zero tolerance policy	1) ☐ 2) ☐ 3) ☐ 4) ☐
3. Parent requests should be respected because parents want what is best for their children	1) ☐ 2) ☐ 3) ☐ 4) ☐
4. If you wouldn't suspend a student because of a health problem, you should not suspend him because he cannot control his temper	1) ☐ 2) ☐ 3) ☐ 4) ☐
5. You need to be respectful of parents' and students' viewpoints when defending your professional judgment	1) ☐ 2) ☐ 3) ☐ 4) ☐
6. If the principal does not let Jace participate in the musical, his decision will anger the music teacher and the other students and endanger the success of the musical.	1) ☐ 2) ☐ 3) ☐ 4) ☐
7. In the long run, the common good is what matters	1) ☐ 2) ☐ 3) ☐ 4) ☐
8. In the long run, it is better to give up a little authority than to risk provoking parents, students, and staff.	1) ☐ 2) ☐ 3) ☐ 4) ☐

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